



Back on the Farm: The Trade-offs in Ecocritical Lives

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Abstract

In this reflective dialogue, the authors explore how the decisions they are making about where and how to live, teach, and write are reflected in the concerns of the field of ecocriticism, as well as in the agricultural fields of their rural home places. The apparent tension between lived ecocritical practice and productive ecocritical scholarship suggests that individuals must make a difficult trade-off, in which they give up one aspect of ecocriticism in order to gain the other. But the authors argue that by understanding individual trade-offs in more nuanced ways—as investments of energy within complex ecological and social relationships—it is possible to reflect on the assumptions that frame our choices and to envision new choices. Ecocriticism could offer a method for optimizing the systems people use to produce and share ideas. For example, ecocritical scholarship could take new forms, of which the authors' conversation is one example. Since ecocriticism must strive for diversity as well as inclusivity in order to be relevant, the authors find that marginal voices will continue to matter to the task of imagining alternative methods for engaging in ecocritical theory and lived practice.

Ecocritical ideas took root and sprouted in the margins of academia, and they brought welcome diversity and newfound relevance to the critical choices available to literary scholars. Yet as some critics seek to legitimize ecocriticism within the academy, bringing it from the margins to the center, we wonder what this will mean for ecocriticism's ability to accommodate both academic productivity and lived practice. This tension is especially real for rural ecocritics like us, who practice a marginalized line of work in the margins of North America.

Will ecocriticism continue to offer a space for pursuing its theoretical goals and values in practical terms? How might ecocritical ideas help us re-examine and re-invent the habitual scholarly means of production, as well as our broader sense of our identities and responsibilities as scholars, educators, and community members? Our collaborative thinking on these questions takes the form of a conversation, in

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which we perform feminist theories of rhetorical listening and use the reflective capabilities of the personal essay as a means for intellectual inquiry. As Krista Ratcliffe explains, rhetorical listening is different from reading for what we agree or disagree with. Instead, like speaking or writing, this practice can be a “trope for interpretive invention” which allows us to hear and then participate in new conversations at the “intersections of . . . cultural categories” (196). By asking us to take responsibility for what we hear and what we articulate, rhetorical listening can open a space for ethical and political action. In our conversation, then, we seek not to debate different perspectives so much as to collaboratively build our shared argument: that marginal voices continue to matter.

Aubrey: This conversation about ecocriticism started in 2006, in a class on literature and the environment that you taught and I participated in at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas.

Kristin: Yes, it was my first year as a tenure-track professor, and the sequencing of the department’s coursework cycle allowed me the freedom to offer a special topics class. I gladly embraced this opportunity to teach the authors who had been particularly important to my graduate work. But, also, I wanted to teach a class that explored a question I believe rests at the heart of education: how should we live? The course both enabled and forced me to articulate for individuals outside of theory and its assumptions how and why ecocriticism could change the way we read texts and read the world.

Aubrey: I remember how quickly that class moved beyond the classroom. One day, after our discussion about Wendell Berry’s *The Unsettling of America*, we gathered outside on the sidewalk so that we could keep talking. This text really resonated with—and deeply troubled—several of us who’d grown up in farming communities. I remember you walking out of the building. You seemed surprised to see us still there, but you didn’t hesitate to join us.

Kristin: I loved the material I was teaching—Berry, along with Annie Dillard, Barbara Kingsolver, Charles Frazier, and others—but the response from you and your classmates was rewarding. Another day, after we talked about food systems and externalities, Majkin announced, with deep regret, she would never be able to enjoy an Oreo again. And Stephanie abandoned drying her hands in the public restrooms because her only options were paper towels or electric hand dryers. So there were a series of interesting, sometimes funny, and sometimes anxious moments when literature prompted us to re-examine our own lives.

Aubrey: Ecocriticism was invigorating. It quickly became more than another critical lens or mental tool for me. Instead, it’s been a kind of active and embodied theoretical practice. I see that ecocriticism has had a material, vocational influence upon the integrity of my life.

Kristin: Why don’t you talk more about what you mean by that.

Aubrey: It’s helped me see that it’s possible to *have* integrity, or that integrity is something that’s worth striving for. By integrity, I mean the possibility of consistency and coherency. I think this is what Wendell Berry means when he says that he wants to live a life that “makes sense.” I used to think that my personal and professional lives were separate, but I first started to realize they didn’t have to be when I was a student in your class. I was heartened to realize that all of the curiosities I nurtured, all of the knowledge I had based on where I was from, could actually be relevant to my professional work—and that this work could be more than just interesting to me, it could be useful to other people, to the land itself.

Kristin: Were there particular ways you were able to see your reading and writing as relevant to other people? To the land?

Aubrey: You encouraged me to intern at The Land Institute, a non-profit agricultural research organization, and the semester I spent there opened my eyes to a kind of life I'd never imagined for myself before. I wrote something about my small hometown that was read by the people there, as well as people not from there, and I started to understand that I didn't have to leave my home region to be a writer. Now this is just the starting point; of course there's more to ecocritical ideas than simple commitment to place. Commitment's complex, and that's part of the joy of it. But I think that without that introduction to ecocriticism, I probably wouldn't have imagined that what I'm doing now—teaching, writing, and pursuing a PhD in English and Great Plains Studies—could be worthwhile. So I'm grateful for that.

Kristin: Gratitude is the word that comes to mind for me, too, when I think about the ways ecocriticism has helped me draw connections between the parts of my life.

Aubrey: How so? Who has encouraged you?

Kristin: As a graduate student, I began writing about farmers and farming in my academic work at the encouragement of my husband, David, who works as a plant breeder at The Land Institute. And I first learned about writers and activists like David Orr, Don Worster, Barbara Kingsolver, Paul Gruchow, Gene Logsdon, Scott Russell Sanders, Bill McKibben, and Michael Pollan from individuals working at or affiliated with The Land Institute. Meanwhile, my dissertation advisor and friend Beth Schultz directed me into ecocriticism, a newly emerging field she'd embraced late in her career, and because of these newly found agrarian writers and ecocritics, the literature I'd always loved but had sometimes had difficulty justifying as a responsible foundation for a professional life suddenly assumed a new relevance. Although I'd spent much of my life reading stories and at least eight years studying these stories in deliberate, intentional ways, ecocriticism provided a bridge between literature and lived practice. Ecocriticism gave new clarity to the purpose of literary storytelling in our present age. Plus, the interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism—a field that invited rather than inhibited conversations between, say, plant breeders and literary scholars—made it accountable to a broader body in an era marked by both global interconnection and acute professional specialization. This accountability really appealed to me.

Aubrey: And how did your work in ecocriticism influence your sense of vocation?

Kristin: The spring I defended my dissertation, David and I bought a little ramshackle farmhouse and eighty acres of overgrown pasture in central Kansas. Although the process of the purchase was complicated—the house was in bad shape and initially did not qualify for a loan, the septic system was nonfunctioning, the 130-year-old hand-dug well didn't pass the health safety inspection, our family was dubious about the purchase—the decision was simpler for us than most in academia might imagine. I didn't have a job in the area, and I didn't know if I would get one. But the three years I'd spent deeply immersed in agrarian and ecocritical writings made buying a broken-down farm an easy choice. David and I wanted our two young boys to grow accustomed to spending time outside and come to know the trees, flowers, and grasses. We wanted them to learn how to take care of animals and understand the hard work of producing food. We wanted to begin practicing resilient living in the face of an uncertain ecological future. Having a little bit of productive land seemed essential to this resilience. I bought a farm *because* of my academic work, not in spite of it.

Aubrey: I don't own a farm, but as you know, I'm connected to one that I think about all the time, and try to visit often. It's the ground that my parents farm and ranch in north-central Kansas, where I grew up. After you and I presented at the 2011 Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) conference, and talked about our initial ideas for this essay, you went home to your farm and I went on to my parents' place.

Kristin: Yes, I remember feeding you lunch in my house—it was over 100 degrees that day—and then sending you on your way. What was it like to go to your folks' place after ASLE?

Aubrey: To use Berry's word—unsettling. I realized that even though I'm striving for integrity, the sense of coherency I described earlier, I'm still far from achieving it.

Kristin: What happened?

Aubrey: You remember that it was harvest time, late June. My husband, Adam, had already been working with my dad a few days to help with cutting the wheat. He drove the combine and grain cart, which I drove a few times when I was younger. I don't drive it anymore; I don't have much of a knack for it, or the inclination. So I just got in the combine for the traditional ride with my dad. He throttled up, shifted the header down, and swiveled the wheel to align the combine's teeth with the gaps in the uncut rows of wheat. If you don't have a flat field—we don't—the header of a combine has to be continually adjusted to match the dips and go over the terraces, to shear the wheat at the right height. My dad did this continually as we talked. I sat in the passenger seat, the kiddie booster seat, the seat where your son—or son-in-law—is supposed to sit and learn how to take over the operation. And I thought, not for the first time: I'm not going to take over the operation, at least not like it is now. I can't; I don't have the skill. But I also don't think I want to. I mean, cutting wheat is truly beautiful to me. You slice through the bleached stalks, and chaff swirls in the air as grain piles up. But you're doing this in a fossil fueled tractor, and the grain is a commodity with a destination and role on the global market.

Kristin: Does your dad understand the conflict you feel?

Aubrey: Yes, I think so. My dad knows about my work, has listened to me talk about Buffalo Bird Woman and ethnobotany, and has read Berry himself. In the combine cab, we talked about things like ecology and economics, land auctions and weeds. I told him about the ASLE conference and the paper I'd presented about alternative agricultures in the Great Plains—alternatives to this kind of agriculture, the conventional business that he's skillfully kept alive for the duration of my life. So even though we're different people with vastly different abilities, I think we share a practical nature that we bring to each of our fields, to the farm and to ecocriticism. My dad isn't nostalgic, never has been. He always points out that when oil runs out or when the price hits a certain point, this way of farming will be no more. He doesn't romanticize the combine, but he doesn't see a different way of life being available to him the way that he thinks it is for me. I admire his honesty about this. But I don't think that I've been able to bridge the gap between his field and my field yet, though I keep on trying to do that in my writing. How do you do that?

Kristin: Perhaps not very well—certainly not easily. The truth is, removed from its context of the large university, the purpose of scholarly production in literary theory is by no means obvious. The community I live in is primarily working class. The major industries of the area, farming included, are working class industries. In addition, my professional community is extremely small. Most of my colleagues are in disciplines different from mine. Most of the students I teach aren't English majors. So, when I talk about

the books and ideas that I find most interesting, I'm usually talking to people who are unfamiliar with them.

Aubrey: It's not just about scholarly writing, then; it's also about how we talk about scholarly writing.

Kristin: Yes. Frankly, trying to explain my reading and writing interests to outsiders forces an unrelenting evaluation of its legitimacy. This is probably true of anyone engaged in a highly specialized field, but the experience does place me firmly outside the assumptions literary scholars tend to take for granted—about what constitutes legitimate productivity, about what carries value, about what is useful or practical, as you said. This isn't necessarily unique to ecocriticism, of course. Every movement that calls for change has to justify itself to people not already committed to it. Living where I do hasn't diminished my interest in the way literature offers insights into our (often troubled) relationships with the nonhuman world, but it has also persuaded me that what we do as ecocritics must ultimately carry some force for those beyond the ecocritical community. If the argument at the heart of ecocriticism is that humans are but one small (albeit destructive) element of a much larger community, then I think we have an even greater responsibility to take care in the way we prioritize our activities. I believe in the power of stories to move people. And theory can move people, too—ecocriticism moved me, and it moved you. But since we have finite time and resources, ecocriticism must also answer questions like: Why are we doing this, and for whom?

Aubrey: What I hear you saying is that one of ecocriticism's main insights is that humans are involved in, and implicated in, the lives of many other beings. And I agree with you that this insight has the potential to be radical and powerful, if it can help ecocritics—as well as people who don't think of themselves as ecocritics—tell new stories, retell old stories, and be moved to act in different ways. Going further than that, you also said that ecocriticism might help us prioritize our actions. Can you explain?

Kristin: Even before prioritizing our actions, I think ecocriticism can help us *place* our actions, and see our work in context. As you know, Bethany College, where I teach and where you earned your undergraduate degree, is a private, religiously-affiliated college of only 600 undergraduate students, located in a town of 3,000. Agriculture remains the primary industry of the region. Seventy-five percent of Bethany's students are athletes; for the most part, they're average students, many of them first-generation college students, who choose our tiny campus because it's nurturing and the small athletic scholarship they receive justifies another four years of competitive sports. The English major attracts some of the school's strongest students, but the major is also one of the smallest on campus, and teaching lower-level writing classes for non-majors is a standard part of my load every semester. The faculty teaching load is 24-27 credit hours per year and I'm currently on four major campus committees. My salary is lower than what I would earn if I were a forklift operator at the county landfill. And Bethany cannot afford to pay its faculty and staff retirement benefits.

Aubrey: For most people, including both of us, I think, this academic place is located on the "margins" of academia.

Kristin: Yes, certainly from the perspective of people and institutions where research and writing are expected and privileged. But an important part of my point is that I'm *not* a forklift operator. Moved by ecocriticism, I took a gamble—choosing a farm before a job—and I got lucky, or, to use the language of my neighbors in this area, I was blessed. I got the farm *and* the job. And when you think you might not get a job you love, and then you do, well, it's a good job, regardless of the pay or the teaching load or the fact most of the students mean well but care far more about Saturday's game than provocative

writing. Another important part of my point, too, is that these details about the job—its unexpectedness, joys, limitations—come with the territory, they're part of the package, in choosing a place. In committing to this place, I've committed to the job it has given me.

Aubrey: I know that you and I see the margin as a potentially fertile place, a potentially rich ecotone. And we're not alone in this perspective. While actual rural people and places around the world tend to remain on the margins of cultural power, ecocritics have acknowledged the need to pay attention to agriculture and rural places, and in both academia and mainstream culture there has been a growing interest in issues of food production, safety, and quality. The other day, an older friend of mine told me that every urban twenty-something she meets wants to be a farmer, even if they're not quite sure what that means. You and I have talked before about Patrick Murphy's invitation in *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*, published over twelve years ago, for ecocritics to examine rural-focused texts. More recently, William Major, in *Grounded Vision*, argues that there is much to be gained from placing agrarians and academics in conversation. So here's my question for you: does living a rural agrarian life on the margins of academia help you engage in ecocritical scholarly production?

Kristin: I'm not sure. It would seem I'm in a prime position to engage in this conversation. But the actual logistics of academic scholarship usually compete with the lived practice of sustainability—and right now I feel my attempt to do both has meant I do neither well. My family's agrarian efforts remain partial, compromised by inexperience—both my husband and I grew up in cities—and by our professional lives off the farm. The schedules of our paid work often interfere with the demands of the growing year. My husband's plant breeding periodically trumps our garden, as the needs of both—watering, weeding, harvesting—frequently coincide. My school year begins just when it's time to work up the corn and tomatoes and start the canning. In fact, I never help with canning—though, between the grading of my freshmen essays, I do call out encouraging words to my husband and boys, as well as to my mom and a neighbor, both of whom help us every year. We raise our own meat but otherwise only supplement our meals with our gardening. If we had to live on what we raised, we might not die, but it would be a meager diet indeed. We heat our home with wood grown on our own property, and we do not own a clothes dryer. However, we drive almost every day; my work commute is 40 miles round trip. In short, by almost any standards, and particularly the standards of our surrounding community, we aren't "real" farmers. My husband might be considered a hobby farmer, and at best, I might be considered his assistant. Our lives aren't sustainable, either. We recognize this, and at times it distresses us.

Aubrey: And I'm assuming that while you're feeding animals and grading composition essays, you're not able to give much thought to scholarly development.

Kristin: Not much. Each summer I catch up on a year's worth of *ISLE* reading. I've presented at a literary conference almost every year, usually in the field of ecocriticism, which ensures at least some annual renewal of currency in the field. But these are modest activities, even under a generous assessment measure. While a heavy teaching load isn't conducive to scholarship to begin with, with careful planning and determination it can be done. My one colleague in the English program (we are a program of two)—a remarkable woman who has run the program for many years, faithfully mentored me for the past seven, and served on nearly every campus committee at some point—has managed to publish four scholarly books during her twenty-five-year tenure, despite the teaching and service demands of the college. In addition to all this, she even has a small garden. But she doesn't have ambitions for maintaining a farm or raising her own food. In other words, the life I've chosen has made it difficult to stay current in the very field that prompted me to choose this life.

Aubrey: I understand this, too. I think about the same paradox in the context of my professional goals. My area of specialization is interdisciplinary Great Plains studies, which already says something about my ambitions. There are no postings on the MLA job list that request this specialization by name, but this is who I am. Very early on in my graduate career—and I'm glad that my department does this, and I think they do it well—my peers and I were asked to think carefully about our career goals and intentions, and about the state of the profession. I feel fairly clear-sighted about the reality of the “market,” and informed about how to strategically create a “marketable profile” if I want to try and get lucky, and get a tenure-track teaching job, which of course I'd love. But, frankly, as much as I love to travel, in the long term I'm committed to making a life on the Great Plains. Knowing this, I've tried to cultivate connections outside the academy, particularly with non-profit organizations whose work I admire. I look for the overlaps, the ways in which my skill sets and local knowledge might be helpful. I work on describing my work to people who aren't academics, many of whom are the people that I care deeply about and hold myself accountable to: my students, my parents, my sisters, my partner. But as the story I told earlier illustrates, this work is partial and ongoing.

Kristin: How does this work play out for you on a daily basis, as a graduate student? You live in Lincoln, Nebraska, one of the few urban centers in an otherwise rural state. Do you experience any tensions between lived ecocritical practice and productive ecocritical scholarship?

Aubrey: Living close to downtown in a city has advantages. My husband Adam (a high school science teacher) and I can both bike to work. We have a small garden, a CSA subscription, and access to locally grown foods at the co-op where we shop. In addition, we have a strong sense of community with like-minded people, colleagues and neighbors and friends who are generous with their time, knowledge, and skills. But that doesn't mean that there aren't any tensions in our lives, especially in relationship to our future after I finish my degree. These have to do with where we'll live, where I'll find a job, and what kind of job that might be. On a daily level, I think I engage with the same kind of questions that many graduate students interested in personal and professional sustainability do. How do I balance my teaching and research commitments with community service and volunteering activities, and with my own needs for rest, renewal, and time with family and friends?

Kristin: What sacrifices are you willing to make in order to achieve professional goals?

Aubrey: Exactly. What am I willing to give up? A commitment to a particular place or to a general region? Time to drive to the next state to visit my family? Cooking dinner and doing the dishes by hand every night? Having children and educating them? What intellectual risks am I *not* going to take in order to achieve my professional goals? How does my professionalization, and the reality of the academy, limit and define the work that I am allowed to do, willing to do, and supported in doing in my life?

Kristin: This last question brings attention to the way in which the choices are about more than just time management. We're also addressing the way in which academic training and productivity creates its own trajectory—into a realm separate from the physical, material lives of rural community members. Scholarship requires different kinds of energy and attention, and the skills it requires are not the same as those required for managing a farm.

Aubrey: My rural parents definitely do different kinds of work on the farm than you and I are doing in this essay. But from another perspective, we all share a position of privilege. The conflicts we're describing here don't even begin to address the larger differences between our lives and options and those of food producers outside of the First World.

Kristin: Certainly our dilemmas are privileged ones. However, I'd argue that our experiences in rural America also help make us aware of the extent to which any intellectual or theoretical pursuit, ecocriticism included, is a luxury of lives marked by affluence and educational opportunity.

Aubrey: In this conversation, I think we're trying to be more explicit about the challenges that we're facing as individuals who have embraced the ecocritical community but also, because of where and how we've done so, feel peripheral in both ecocriticism and the places we call home. For me, there's value in telling and hearing these stories because they might help other people reflect on and make sense of their own lives. We aren't the only people struggling to figure out which trade-offs to make, and how to make them.

Kristin: I think we should talk more about the notion of a "trade-off" itself, which seems to be what we're grappling with in this discussion about praxis and theory. When you read the conversations about the conflicts between scholarship and lived practice, in, say, the "Special Forum on Ecocriticism and Theory" in *ISLE's* Autumn 2010 issue, overwhelmingly, folks seem to concur that both praxis and theory are important. For example, Serpil Oppermann writes that theory can create the "space" for cultural and political change. But there's also a tendency to set up the praxis/theory tension as though there are only two variables. In his infamous "Woodshed" article, a spirited critique of Simon Estok's "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia," S. K. Robisch implies that if you theorize too abstractly about the environment, then you can't actually be familiar with that environment. This sets up a pretty clear dichotomy: either you're living it, or you're theorizing about it. You can't do both.

Aubrey: I think my response would be that as humans, we find it difficult *not* to do both. Isn't our conversation here a form of theory, for instance, as well as a lived practice involving both of us? Yet I realize that for some, this particular lived practice may not seem radical enough, or this particular form of theorizing may not seem scholarly enough.

Kristin: The experiences and tensions we've described imply a negative correlation between living a life characterized by ecological activism and scholarly production. In other words, the more committed to activism you are, or the more authentically you're living an environmentally responsible life, the more difficult it is to produce writing. However, if we read a book like Greta Gaard's *The Nature of Home*, a memoir that describes in detail the way she's aimed to practice genuine activism, and place that alongside Gaard's incredible productivity as a scholar, we see that some folks have managed to do both: live enacted practice and write theory that is read and respected.

Aubrey: We both know people like this. They're inspirations.

Kristin: Perhaps we should consider the possibility that we're thinking about trade-offs in our field too simplistically. There is much to our lives, and we don't simply divide our time in two ways.

Aubrey: The assumption is that trade-offs mean one or the other, as if a trade-off is always a choice between two opposite things. But there are lots of interconnected variables in our ecosphere.

Kristin: Right. As I mentioned earlier, my husband, David, is a plant breeder. He's working on developing perennial grains, and the notion of biological trade-offs is something he pays attention to in his research. He's helped me think about the concept. David finds people tend to use the notion of "trade-offs" too loosely and sometimes sloppily. We usually use the term "trade-off" to describe a fixed relationship between two variables, and we assume that if one variable is increased, another must be decreased. In David's work, an example would be the size of annual grain seeds versus perennial grain

seeds. Grains that are planted annually—like wheat or sorghum or corn—have lots of large seeds. That's why they're such a valuable food source—they have numerous big seeds. The seeds are much larger than perennial grain seeds. Most folks familiar with the notion of biological trade-offs assume that if annual grains were to become perennial, they would have to give up the big seeds because their energy would be needed for something else, like generating the incredibly massive root systems characteristic of perennial plants.

Aubrey: But, as the ecological adage goes, you can never do just one thing. Or, maybe, you can never know just one thing.

Kristin: What David points out is that a negative correlation, which is a statistical trend, should not be confused with a direct cause or an absolute truth. So while, yes, annual grains currently have big seeds and shallow roots, and perennial grains have deep roots and small seeds, this doesn't mean perennial grains can't ever have large seeds. It's possible, for instance, that plants might have resources or energy that haven't been tapped yet. For example, because a perennial lives a lot longer than an annual plant, it does a great deal more photosynthesis, and just because that extra energy isn't currently channeled into seed growth doesn't mean it couldn't be. Furthermore, in any given plant, there are many, many variables contributing to how that plant functions. For instance, a given wild perennial might have a spiny surface for protection as well as deep roots. If the plant was domesticated, it wouldn't need spines. So that characteristic could be bred out, and the energy going into spine production could be redirected into seed growth. A plant is a complex organism.

Aubrey: And this example might help us think about the way we evaluate trade-offs in our lives? Maybe it could function as an analogy for us?

Kristin: I think so. Perhaps it can help us think about possibilities we're not seeing. Another important point David makes about plant breeding, for example, is that it's inaccurate to assume that whatever is natural is also optimized. We tend to assume that if something exists a certain way in nature, it does so because it is optimal to be that way—that it is the best possible way to survive. But this isn't necessarily the case. Lots of wild plants have viruses and parasites, for instance, which draw on their energies. If you get rid of those viruses and parasites, the plant energy could be redirected.

Aubrey: It seems that a more complex understanding of trade-offs gets at the underlying assumptions that frame the choices we think we *have*, before we even get to deliberating what choice to make.

Kristin: Yes, it's a challenge to move beyond what we know for certain into what could be—the variables are complicated, and what we already know can keep us from imagining alternatives.

Aubrey: When I asked my dad about how he would define a trade-off in his field, he said, "Every day is a trade-off." We talked about the various environmental, economic, and social factors at work: the weather, the land's capabilities and needs, labor, time, machines, community obligations. But what really got me was the core narrative of economic survival. That's what some farmers perceive to be in conflict with environmental values. Without making a profit, or without meeting the expectations of a landlord, a farmer or rancher may not have or may lose access to land. My dad said that trade-offs used to get easier as you got older, since you were more financially secure, but now the reverse is true. Land prices are up, and so are the prices for inputs (like fertilizers), so farming in the global economic system seems much more risky. Yet gambling on risks within this system, rather than playing it safe *or* taking the risk of leaving the system, is seen to be the only way to survive. I see this also in our field, in which we're told that our work is at risk of not being relevant, or that if we don't do the right kind of work, our

survival—as institutions, or as humans in a warming world—will be at risk. There’s an urgency in the work of activists for ecological and social justice.

Kristin: So the implication is that we must act now, but we need to think critically before and as we act.

Aubrey: Yes. My university has an interdisciplinary speaker series—called “Humanities on the Edge”—which has examined the idea of “crisis” that pervades discourse about the humanities, and I think this is a good point of engagement. How do we understand trade-offs in a world of risk? I’m inclined to agree with one of Ursula Heise’s points in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. She argues, “the study of risk perceptions and their sociocultural framing must form an integral part of an ecocritical understanding of culture” (13).

Kristin: Giving up a present benefit for a possible advantage in a future we cannot fully predict is hard—but it’s nonetheless at the heart of a sustainable life. In a world in which energy—for better or worse—is measured in terms of money, actions do have costs and benefits. We could acknowledge and accept that. It might be helpful, then, to understand investments as acts that have present costs but that are a form of saving for the future—in other words, as costs that have benefits, or that have *more* benefits.

Aubrey: Making trade-offs needs to be recognized as making reflective decisions, choices that actually reflect our values as well as what we know. I see this balance between analytical reflection and action being explored in some ecocritical work. For example, Cheryll Glotfelty’s essay “Reclaiming Nimby: Nuclear Waste, Jim Day, and the Rhetoric of Local Resistance” illustrates how movements might communicate with and act in solidarity with each other. She identifies this as a “literature of local resistance.” For me, the lesson is that we would do well to rely on our observed experiences to make predictions, to think critically about both “culture” and “nature,” and to think creatively about risks and rewards beyond the present moment.

Kristin: I agree. But also, like David points out, we need to be vigilant about what we credit as a fully optimized system. What we know might be familiar to us, and therefore more comfortable, but that doesn’t mean it’s optimal. This is true in how we live and how we work. In academia, for example, literature specifically, writing highly theoretical papers and books has become the standard system for acquiring promotion and gaining scholarly respect and prestige. We’re trying to figure out how to place ourselves in this system. But we also need to be asking whether the system is optimal. If not, what would improve it?

Aubrey: A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by Mark Bauerlein raised a slightly different question. Does the data about how literary research is paid for—and how often it is cited—demonstrate that scholarship is worthwhile? Bauerlein’s answer was no. He argued that the humanities would be better off in not demanding as much research, and a large group of commenters responded with their own arguments. But I was struck by the point that scholarship should be measured in such a way that tells us whether or not the system is optimal.

Kristin: This might be a useful form of assessment.

Aubrey: If we assess our effectiveness as ecocritics by what we can measure, it makes sense to think about what can be measured, and what should be, and who is doing the measuring. What you said about the costs and benefits of trade-offs seems to relate to the pressure ecocritics have felt to justify their work as contributing to a “real theory.” We’ve talked before about how ecocritical ideas were formed in the margins of the academy, and I can’t help but wonder if that location has been important

for the diversity of perspectives ecocriticism now fosters. What will it mean if ecocriticism is legitimized? And who makes this call? These are philosophical and political questions—and theoretical as well as practical ones.

Kristin: The dominant form of scholarship—writing and publishing articles in peer-reviewed journals or academic books—encourages and reinforces a particular kind of conversation. Actually, I’m not sure it’s really a “conversation.” It’s perhaps better described as a series of contributions on a given topic, question, or dilemma. This encourages methodical, thorough approaches to thinking and sharing—and, given the speed of academic publishing, a decidedly protracted approach—but it both shapes and limits the way ideas develop and who participates in the conversation.

Aubrey: I’m curious to know how ecocriticism might help us think about how the conditions of academia—the locations of institutions, the requirements for tenure, the expectations for graduate students, and so forth—influence what kind of scholarly work we produce, or can produce. Can ecocritical theory be applied to institutions of higher education, to the means and modes of scholarly production? If so, what might it show us?

Kristin: That we may need to think about investment differently, and this may include asking an uncomfortable question like “will this matter in ten or twenty or one hundred years”? This is a much harder question to answer than “will this matter for my tenure review”? If we believe ecocriticism has value beyond the professional development of its practitioners, then we need to be honest about how academic institutions necessarily frame our goals and discourse. If this frame excludes or marginalizes folks who we’d like to be included, then we need to take steps to better optimize the system. I’d like to think the conversation we’re having here, for instance, has a place in scholarship, too. It may not provide a review of the literature, as a conventional article would be expected to do, but we’re having an actual conversation, which allows for immediate clarification and development of ideas. The exchange also reflects and encourages a *relationship* between participants, and I view relationships as crucial for any real change—in people, in places. Given ecocriticism’s recognition of inter-relationships in a complex world, it seems fitting for our scholarship to allow space for this. If others agree, then the dialogue we’re having might serve as an example of how changing the parameters of a given system, or reconsidering the necessity of certain variables within it, might make that system more optimal for certain members.

Aubrey: My sense is that as economic situations continue to be unstable, institutions—especially those on the margins, who are most at risk—may be more willing to rethink the ways that research and teaching are valued, or the expectations that they have for scholarly production; changing the conditions of production might offer new possibilities for the production of diverse contributions. Some ideas raised by digital humanists might be useful to consider. For instance, I would like to see more value given to ecocritical work that develops over time in public spaces, maybe online, and that involves students and community members as well as scholars. By “more value,” I mean institutional support, but also community engagement. In other words, I’m trying to imagine forms of work that bring people who might not seem to have anything in common—such as my father, a farmer on the Great Plains, and an academic attending the MLA convention, and a scientist on a different continent—into a community and a conversation.

Kristin: This could take some interesting forms. It would be fascinating to follow a wiki, for instance, one that identifies its contributors, maintained by the folks you mention. An advantage of legitimizing something like this would be not only that it accommodates more voices but also it would force more

accountability to those on the margins of the community. This wouldn't have to replace current forms of scholarship, but it could certainly supplement them and ensure that ecocriticism remains diverse, inclusive, and therefore relevant to more than just a few people. If ecocriticism fails to acknowledge those inhabiting the perimeters—people like you, Aubrey, whose dad actually farms with a combine, or people like me, whose students are rural undergraduates in General Education classes—then it will fail to matter. It will fail as an optimal system for sharing ideas, for exploring the question of how we should live. Writers of ecocritical theory must be able to imagine their readers include folks like us—we're among the variables to be considered in planning for the future. Ecocritics must be capable of recognizing our potential to speak to and with those around us.

Aubrey: Of course, the more things going on, the higher the risk of fragmentation. But—and I'm thinking here of the diverse responsibilities we take on, for example as women, mothers, spouses, sisters, teachers, administrators, writers, mentors—in a complex, diverse system, there is a greater payoff for integration. In fragmentation, even in our current tensions, there's an opportunity to sense and seek out the deeper and wider tensions, and in the process of sensing these we may discover ways to bring things into alignment—adaptable ways, towards an alignment that isn't stolid or "balanced," but instead is coherent, flexible, and resilient.

Kristin: And by making this investment, ecocriticism might continue to matter—for you, for me, and for those in our communities.

Aubrey: The alternative methods we consider for engaging in ecocriticism might just be more resilient and sustainable than our current, narrower understanding of what constitutes legitimate scholarship. By going to the edges of our field, we might learn how to theorize and practice new methods of producing and sharing knowledge.

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